

# **Liberalism, Sexuality and the Future of the Uniting Church**

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*(Note: This is a slightly edited version of the shorter paper presented at the RA Conference: July 2004)*

### Introduction

#### **1. The Liberal Theological Development of the Uniting Church**

The current debate about sexuality in the UCA would not have arisen to the extent it has without a prominent liberal theological presence in the key councils of the Assembly. Why has the UCA developed an overt liberal theological orientation and public presence, when its membership has been largely theologically conservative?

*(Note: I am aware that the use of terms or labels is always problematical. As NLCS results have shown, not everyone likes to be in a category, but categories are still willingly chosen by many people. I have used the terms liberal/liberal theological and conservative or conservative evangelical because they do represent common theological identifications and groups within the Uniting Church)*

##### **1.1 Heritage**

Given the context of union, the UCA was always destined to become more theologically liberal than the antecedent denominations because in the case of Congregationalism and Presbyterianism the majority of the conservative ministers, and a good section of the more conservative members stayed out of union. It is worth considering that there are important differences still today between Synods and Presbyteries. For example the different public positions and ethos of the synods of Queensland and Victoria reflect the different theological foundations, history, antecedent church background and elected leadership of the first decades.

It is worth noting that Victoria was the only state to have more Presbyterians enter union than Methodists. (Bentley: 2000, 1996).

Methodists had a more overt conservative theological orientation, reflecting their practical theology grounded in the holiness movement and active evangelism schools. States which had significantly more Methodists were naturally going to be more conservative Synods, unless they also had more overt liberal leadership, and in this case they would eventually become very polarised Synods. A mixed state like NSW, would become a more middling or moderate Synod.

Today, different theological emphases appear to be consolidating or developing, particularly between rural and city presbyteries and Synods, with the majority of rural presbyteries being conservative in their orientation, though this is not uniform.

## **1.2 The Interim report on Sexuality**

I believe that much of the context and direction of liberal theology in the current debate and discussion in the church can be traced to the didactic report of the Task Group on Sexuality. The Victorian base of the Task Group, the process adopted, the interim report, and the report itself, all point to foundational aspects which are important to examine when considering the deepening polarisation which has developed in the UCA during the last 8 years. Probably a minority of members in the church knew little if anything, about the theological orientation of the members of the Task Group, but it was a significant factor for those who did (those who were most aware were also from Victoria). My unpublished article commenting on liberal responses to the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality attempts to explain the context of the reaction to the responses.

One quote from a response to the Interim Report on Sexuality (and a keen supporter of the Interim Report will suffice):

*"The direction and style of the Report are utterly predictable from a quick glance at the composition of the Group. Since this is so manifestly apparent to anyone with a close familiarity with the Uniting Church, one can only conclude that this is by design, being to 'lead from the front in taking the church forward.'"*

(For an overview of the responses, see Bentley, February 1997).

### **1.31.3 Leadership of Officers and Members, particularly in the Assembly**

Before the Task Group on Sexuality the liberal theological section of the church had strengthened its involvement in the growing institutional life of the church (including most Synods), and following it has maintained significant influence through service on key Synod and Assembly committees which contribute to the overall directional leadership of the church.

## **1.4 Theological Training**

Theological training in the UCA is generally seen as progressive and theologically liberal in character (with some individual and Synod exceptions). Liberal theological education, and an increased liturgical orientation supported by significant UCA figures, has increased the number of progressively minded clergy serving in congregations and in particular in the institutional life of the church, all of whom naturally support the current progressive direction of the church.

## **1.5 The renewal of the diaconate**

One of the most significant changes in the last 10 years has been the renewal of the diaconate. It should be noted that the renewal of the diaconate started from the deaconess movement (see also 1.6). The UCA diaconate is by nature, liberal in theology (there are always individual

exceptions among actual deacons), because it is orientated to progressive theology, especially feminist, liberation and social justice theologies.

### **1.6 Gender and Age Factors**

It was evident from the responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality that female ministers were more likely to affirm the direction of the report, especially with regard to homosexuality (Bentley: February 1997). While this group was clearly not a statistically valid sample, at least anecdotally, female ministers are usually less conservative than male ministers. The experience of women in terms of relating stories of discrimination in the church and ordained ministry was a major feature of female ministerial responses to the report on sexuality. Women ministers were also more likely to indicate they had close homosexual friends. It appears that gender is more important than age in terms of ministerial theological position.

Certainly in general in the church, a younger age does not mean the person will take a more liberal theological position on matters related to sexuality, in fact it is the reverse in terms of active church attendance, though this is because the overwhelming majority of young people in the Uniting Church attend conservative evangelical and charismatic congregations. (For a discussion on some aspects of gender, age and youth in terms of the Uniting Church and also society see Hughes, Philip: June 1997; Bentley, August 1997 and Bellamy: 2002, p.56,)

### **1.7 Attitudes to Sexuality in a changing society**

From studies examining marriage statistics, I have shown how significant the UCA is in terms of marriage for one or both divorced persons (see reports in *Pointers, 1996-2001*). It is therefore not surprising to find that some members of the UCA, particularly those clergy involved in a pastoral service, adopt a more liberal approach to sexuality issues in general.

Among our older members as well, it is not uncommon for children to be in de- facto relationships. In my personal discussions I have found an interesting trend that reflects perhaps a more worrying 'atheological' position, and a trend which could be subtly reinforced by a liberal theological agenda. It appears that some members feel that they are not able to have a position on current sexual issues because this may offend their own children or someone else's children. Parents who have a homosexual child, or a spouse with a homosexual partner, are also anecdotally less likely to be conservative on sexuality matters for fear of alienation, and may even be able to persuade their local church to refrain from an opinion. Some are going further and taking up an active role in terms of support and advocacy. This follows the trend in U.S. churches for parents to become more militant about sexuality than their children, as witnessed at the demonstrations at the General Conference of the United Methodist Church in 2000, promoting the issue as a justice issue on a level with racism and slavery.

### **1.8 The dominance of personal story in UCA theology**

It is an irony that as a perceived liberal theological church, the UCA can produce strident critics of pentecostal and charismatic theology because of their perceived reliance on experience, and yet within the public voice of liberal theology, personal experience is the cornerstone of UCA theology. The last ten years in particular, the UCA has witnessed the arrival of narrative theology as the dominant force at our major meetings, with the story the main point of most speeches. Those who have close homosexual friends or are homosexual themselves usually ground their argument in their own experience and story, making it increasingly difficult for people to speak against homosexual practice as it appears the person is denigrating past speakers. There was a common theme among a section of responses to the Interim Report on Sexuality, namely that once you get to know a homosexual minister you will change your mind. I believe that current Uniting Church meeting processes enhances a certain type of pastoral approach, and places power in the hands of the story teller. Previously power had been with perhaps the most articulate speaker, now it is with the most moving and emotional.

This factor was a key element at the Eighth Assembly with the debate moving quickly to a level of significantly heightened emotion which had personal implications for respected people in the life of the Assembly. Personalisation of the debate is very significant when it comes to persuading a council of the church.

### **1.9 The growing theme of justice for the homosexual person**

Up to the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly, competing interests kept the Assembly from formalising a more radical approach to sexuality. In particular the covenant with Aboriginal people, and relationships to migrant-ethnic congregations meant that competing values were usually swayed by these two groups in particular. By the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly this competition was clearly over and the theme of justice for homosexual persons dominated the focus. The involvement of some of the more progressive people from non-anglo backgrounds also helped to diffuse the usually evangelical and conservative migrant-ethnic voices.

### **1.10 The overwhelming non-liberal approach of our ministers and institutional leadership when it comes to politics.**

Political commentators like Anthony Green have often remarked publicly on the correlation of religion and voting patterns. Past surveys have shown that the membership of the UCA is overwhelmingly Liberal Party and National Party voting. ( Hughes: October 1991)

This is contrasted with the ministerial and institutional leadership which in my extensive contacts over 15 years is mostly Labor, or perhaps Greens, (probably not so much Democrat now days), reflecting also the UCA's social

justice and community orientation. Many ministers and leaders have privately bewailed the fact of the general political conservative orientation of the majority of the membership of the Uniting Church.

### **1.11 The perceived identity and ethos of the UCA**

It is commonly assumed there is a UCA ethos, but defining this is clearly easier for the church leaders than members. The leadership in general has an understanding of the character of the UCA and are committed to developing and expounding this ethos as they see it. The ethos has a foundational liberal theological agenda and this is a contrast to many of our congregational members.

In particular, many members in our migrant-ethnic congregations have such a loose affiliation with the UCA, that radical sexual ethics could just make things a little harder in terms of continuing membership and relationships. Some of these congregations (and yes our Anglo ones as well) see themselves as being under the 'umbrella' of the Uniting Church, which means their identity and cohesion are very much related to how they are perceived within their wider ethnic community, and one outcome of this debate will be an increased move toward mono-cultural presbyteries. I perceive that one perhaps unintended consequence of the move to establish a Korean Commission in NSW is that Korean congregations can begin to distance themselves from the present sexuality context of the wider UCA.

## **2. CURRENT ISSUES AND SEXUALITY**

The situation today reflects a polarisation of views on sexuality, particularly homosexuality, in a denomination which has never seen before in Australia. Why is this so?

### **2.1 Why wouldn't it be?**

As I outlined in an article in *Uniting Church Studies* in August 1997, I believe it would have been more unusual if the sexuality focus hadn't been on homosexuality. The growing public discussion, influence and position of homosexual people in society in the 1970s and 1980s provided a pointer to how homosexuality was become a major focus for the church. It is the issue for the last decade and the one we are now in. The UCA has not had the same level of dispute with controversial issues before, as even on matters like baptism and abortion it has been able to cope with stated doctrinal positions or a more liberal point of view in practice.

What has happened this time is that the liberal agenda has been so far removed from the opinions of the overall membership, that it has unwittingly focussed the attention on homosexuality and made this one issue the centre of the debate.

It is not uncommon for a denomination or Christian group to have one concern that for its members having the "right" view about the issue becomes a sign of orthodoxy for a particular group. For the UCA this is homosexuality. It has become the ground on which sides stand, and in two broad camps, with evangelical conservatives concerned for their understanding and perceived identity of the Church (catholic), and for liberals, their perceived identity of the Uniting Church.

## **2.2. Openness and Coming Out**

Rather than reconciliation, there has been increased division over homosexual related issues since the early 1990s. Having openly homosexual Assembly staff, candidature issues, the private and public blessing of same-sex relationships in UCA congregations, have escalated the debate over the last ten years, particularly within certain Synods where the Synod leadership has been supportive of the agenda of liberal sexual theology. Over the last 10 years, several Assembly officers and leaders have openly supported the progressive side, while conservative evangelical leaders have been urged by moderates in the church to try to hold the church together and not become partisan, strangely implying that only the actions of conservatives can contribute to the fracturing of the church.

Various networks or lobby groups of "concerned" members have been established on both sides, and the level of discussion and debate is now on a visible and public level unprecedented in the life of the Uniting Church.

## **2.3 Personal Dynamics operating in the Church**

I believe this is now an irreconcilable division between progressive and conservative evangelical groups in the UCA. There is always a tendency even in our supposedly safe and open church to only mix with like-minded people who willingly reinforce our viewpoints and I believe the liberal support during times of reactions to changing sexual ethics is relevant here. Liberal members are far more united and supportive of each other, and help to reinforce the common assumption among some pro-liberal people that their opponents are actually only a minority, albeit a vocal minority..

## **2.4 Continued Denial of the opinions of the majority of the church**

One of the critical reasons for this issue to continue to run hot is the refusal of many councils of the church to really adequately acknowledge the conservative viewpoints of the majority of members, and in particular to give them any real credence.

Based on my knowledge of National Church Life Survey material and National Social Science material between 1990 and 2001, there is no way around explaining the conservative views of the overwhelming majority of UCA members about matters related to sexuality, except that they have conservative views. I know there is a small, but growing group of people who fit into the 'don't know' category in terms of the question of

homosexuals in leadership, and I believe the NCLS survey of 2001 points to this, though it would also be very interesting to see the breakdown of rural and city statistics on this point.

A growing 'not sure' group should not surprise anyone who has been following this debate. The last 7 years have been a virtual battleground with liberal theological opinion holding sway in an attempt to make members waver from their previous stance, coupled as I have said with the increase in general contact with, and experience of people in homosexual and defacto relationships.

Three common themes have been:

a) The view that many members just simply do not understand the theology of the new sexual ethics, and the standard adage 'we just need to sit and listen to each other a bit more' (which is now cynically interpreted by conservative evangelicals as meaning those members who do not believe the "right" things need to listen in order to know what they should believe).

It is my observation that some progressive church liberals hope that by introducing the process of "listening to one another" members will change their viewpoint, always of course in favour of a liberal perspective. Many liberal members and leaders in the church I have met have been seemingly devastated or at least extremely concerned when their views are not greeted with the elation they feel they deserve. It is difficult for them to accept that people may have actually heard their point of view, actually understood it and still reject it.

b) Members should not tell other members what to believe or do.

This is an interesting response as it presumes that only conservative evangelical members are telling other members what to believe or do. This of course is total myth making, as even a person who appears to not hold a position really does hold a position.

c) The negative orientation of members toward a progressive theology is simply not true or can be shown to be reported in a different way.

This became the focus for some people in the church, particularly with the recent attempt by the Reforming Alliance to canvas members' viewpoints, using an open questionnaire format. Rather than look at the significant issues, the wording of the questions is attacked, the results questioned and belittled. While many comments could be made about recent surveys, the main fact remains, that there are substantial numbers of people who are concerned. It appears that one continuing response is to ignore this fact and hope that the debate will disappear.

## **2.5 Sexuality and society**

Interestingly, views of people who identify as an affiliate of the UCA and never attend, have more in common with members who hold a liberal

theology than those who attend regularly.

Will these non-attenders be attracted to a more liberal church? Well, probably a very small number will, but not enough to stem the exodus the other way. There are 2 factors here which are important:

a) the UCA does not have a foundational sacramental or liturgical clientele;  
b) people who have more liberal views on sexuality also have liberal views on more traditional aspects of Christian theology. Why would they come to church when they can encounter ethics and values similar to their own in other parts of society. People in the non-attending category, are primarily interested in ethics and values, rather than the Church.

## **2.6 A focus on one area of perceived social justice**

Over the last seven years, three areas in which the UCA has traditionally been identified have taken a back seat to the question of the place of gay and lesbian people in the church:

- \* Ecumenism and dialogues
- \* Relationships with the Congress and Aboriginal people
- \* Multicultural and cross cultural relationships

In the 1997 Assembly, it was the Church's broad commitment to these three strengths that prevented radical decisions about sexuality being made. By the time of the 2003 Assembly, these three emphases had been marginalised to a certain extent, with the position of a choice being made more implicit in how people voted. While the commitment of the church was publicly still outlined, there was also an emphasis that it was time to make a more defined commitment to gay and lesbian people in the church, and the impact of the church's decisions on these traditional areas of its identity was required to take a back seat. I perceived that there was not the same level of serious consideration about the fall-out. Also, in the area of migrant-ethnic representation, there was not the same level of public agreement at the Assembly itself, and alternate voices could easily put the argument that times had changed, and there were different voices which should be heard.

## **3. The Future of the UCA**

**If the UCA becomes a more liberal church at an official level, then I can see the following issues will compound.**

### **3.1 The crisis of Identity will increase**

The Uniting church has many congregations which do not significantly identify as "Uniting". They may have a symbol, but their identity is local and reflects 2 factors:

- a) the failure of the UCA to create an identity that is understood and embraced by its membership, and  
b) the increasing non-denominational character which is permeating the

UCA.

A church which has no clear allegiance and identification among its membership which then moves to embrace a radically different sexual ethic will simply find itself in crisis (like it presently is).

### **3.2 The challenge to present UCA polity**

Identity is related to polity and it is clear to me that the UCA will not be able to sustain our polity in the future, particularly if the UCA has a significant loss of membership and viable congregations. The Synods and Assembly will downsize with the Synods dealing mainly with practical matters (especially property and legal issues), and the Assembly eventually focussing on the triennial assembly, with some parts becoming even more established separate organisations.

### **3.3 Age Profile and congregational change**

Another point I have usually laboured in past reports and articles is the coming impact of an ageing church. The next five years are critical, because more of our older members will move into the next stage, where they are not able to help with the running of the church. This will come at a time when in many cases the younger people will leave. While the majority of members who were going to leave this latest time have now left, there will be a catastrophic exodus after 2006 if the Assembly adopts more radical sexuality proposals. This exodus from the church will have a quick compounding effect as remaining congregations become non-viable, and many older members who are left become increasingly unable to take on the roles demanded by our polity and local ministries.

If there is similar situation, then there will still be a major exodus, but a slower long-term decline.

Thus in the next 5 years the Uniting Church could decrease even more than considered by most church watchers in the past, including myself.

This will manifest itself in changes to our congregational base in the following ways:

- \* The rural UCA will almost suffer the most significant decline, with many remaining groups continuing to be conservative and perhaps lay lead faith communities, unless the Synods or asset richer city churches provide funding for ministry and mission.
- \* Many Churches in city areas will survive at least in the short-term (five years) because of investment and property income, even if they have fewer members.
- \* Established Niche type liberal churches will consolidate in the short-term in the city areas
- \* Parish Missions will become stronger (unless they have already collapsed), and will probably have the ability to draw the resources of other uniting

churches to maintain their community and social services.

### **3.4 Property**

One episode of the English comedy, *Yes Prime Minister* had a story about the best run hospital in England, with the reason being the hospital had no patients. The danger for the UCA is that as congregations close the church will become asset rich.

This will have interesting consequences:

- a) the church will have resources to be able to pay ministers who cannot find a congregation in the diminishing and increasingly choosy world of pastoral ministry;
- b) there will be a major rationalisation of all property in order to pay for the massive future (and current) bills for heritage buildings and other needed services.
- c) Smaller congregations have become far less viable in the overall picture and are more likely to close because core members (who are usually older long standing faithful members) are not being replaced, and the congregation cannot maintain the property. Many properties are used by community groups and the community help provided by the UCA will suffer.

### **3.5 The future of ordained ministry – this will face increased challenge**

While there will be fewer opportunities for ordained ministers to be in congregational based ministry, there will be increased opportunity for lay people and ministers of other churches, who will take on roles, particularly of a part-time nature in rural areas. This may also increase the conservative nature of these congregations as more people from non-Uniting backgrounds minister in the UCA in the guise of community churches.

### **3.6 The UCA is not the United Church of Canada.**

I have laboured this point before, because I am still amazed at well meaning UCC members who come out to the UCA and tell the UCA it will be okay because they are still there. There are significant differences in the historical development of the two churches and these have been underestimated before in the UCA and beyond.

### **3.7 Division will consolidate**

I have already outlined some of the reasons why I believe that polarisation and division will continue seemingly without a resolution, but I will conclude with three comments:

- a) There is a danger that the UCA will increasingly move to focus on pastoral theology in the hope that we can seemingly satisfy everyone. We can never satisfy everyone, as the present situation shows. In effect the liberal side has presently achieved significant aims, and the conservative side has been

marginalised. . Anyone in ministry has made mistakes because there is a tendency to err on the pastoral side, but there is always the danger we will some day not be able to give people what they ask for.

UCA doctrine is in danger of becoming increasingly irrelevant and our regulations redundant. Perhaps this is the way the church will go in terms of polity, toward a congregational arrangement, away from the original basis of Uniting? Will it however degenerate to the extent of the time recorded in *Judges 21: 25*, each person doing what was right in their own eyes?

b) Consensus decision-making has lost its rosy glow. It may have been dealt a mortal blow at the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly, and in any case it is evident that it will be increasingly challenged because all sides know how to use consensus procedures to their advantage.

c) How can we satisfy two very different groups, with theological understandings which are in reality mutually exclusive. It is possible to have a church with too much diversity? For many the limit has been reached and the way (s) forward are not known. Will it be regional presbyteries? Commissions, networks, or Synods, will there be even alternate Assemblies? Finally, sometimes it is said that there is a conspiracy for change in the Uniting Church? Well, not if a conspiracy means secrecy. There are simply two very different views on ecclesiology as manifested in the body known as the Uniting Church in Australia.

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